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978-1-107-58571-3 - A Short Account Of Canteens in the British Army

John Fortescue

Excerpt

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A SHORT ACCOUNT OF CANTEENS IN THE BRITISH ARMY

PRIMITIVE armies live by plunder, a system which necessarily leads to much waste, wanton destruction and oppression. The organising of plunder into a system of supply by the chiefs of an army is a matter which concerns the history of the Army Service Corps. But the work of these chiefs was always supplemented by the enterprise of private adventurers who followed an army with foodstuffs for sale; and in fact these adventurers were so essential to the subsistence of an army in the field that very soon they also were placed under military regulation. Our own regiments—and indeed those of all Europe—were originally formed on the model of the mercenary bands, Italian, Swiss and German, which came into being in the fifteenth century, and were the first professional soldiers of modern times. We seem to have taken the Germans chiefly as our pattern; and happily we have some information as to their method of dealing with these private adventurers or, to give them their English name, sutlers. The word sutler, by the way, was borrowed from the Dutch, and

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signified one who drove a mean and petty trade; so that the business evidently was not at first of the most exalted kind.

THE SUTLERS OF EARLY TIMES

The sutlers in a German regiment were placed under the control of the Provost Marshal, the official charged with the maintenance of the regiment's internal discipline¹; and to this sufficiently onerous duty was added that of the regulation of the markets. Whenever, therefore, a regiment halted for any time in one place, the Provost Marshal selected the site for a market, erected a gallows there as the symbol of his office, and fixed the tariff of prices. This last was an extremely delicate duty for, if he made the prices too high, he offended the men, and, if too low, he alienated the sutlers upon whom the nourishment of the regiment depended. For his consolation he had his perquisites—a fee for every beast slaughtered and for every cask broached—though even so he appears to have been none too well paid². Here we

¹ A German regiment varied greatly in strength, but might number as many as four thousand men.

² It may as well be stated here once for all that, until the nineteenth century, officials of all kinds in all branches of administration depended for emolument principally on fees. The reason was that, until the introduction of the credit system and of cheques, salaries were not regularly paid.

THE SUTLERS OF EARLY TIMES

have the germ of the later canteen, both wet and dry, with the Provost Marshal for Canteen-Steward.

THE SUTLER IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The present British Army was made, it may be said, in 1645; and at that time the Commissary provided the men with bread and cheese; though during the Civil War men must frequently have had the opportunity (if they had the money) to buy meat and vegetables in the market for themselves. But when Marlborough entered upon his great campaigns in Flanders in 1702, bread only was issued by the Commissary, and for all other matters the troops were dependent on sutlers who were regularly licensed. Each regiment had one grand sutler, and each troop or company one petty sutler, who received storage for their horses from the Commissary; the numbers being limited to fourteen horses for a battalion of foot, twelve for a regiment of dragoons and fifteen to a regiment of horse. The major¹, as the staff-officer of the regiment, was responsible that the sutlers sold by fair weight and measure, and that their goods were sound and wholesome; but it does not appear that he fixed the price.

It was ordered that the men should mess regularly, and that they should have bacon or "other

¹ The adjutant was originally the major's adjutant or assistant. In France he is still called aide-major.

THE SUTLER IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

flesh meat” twice a week, the expense of which was met by stoppage from their pay. For vegetables, parties were sent out to gather roots, though no doubt the sutlers sometimes offered something better. Commanding officers were further required to encourage butchers (who were likewise licensed) to follow their regiments with a good stock of meat and cattle “on the hoof,” and to sell meat to the men lest they should expend too much of their money in drink. This suggests that the sutler’s was in the main a “wet” canteen; but it is very probable that the sutler frequently acted also as butcher. It is significant that the day always ended with the call “tap to,” which we now call tattoo, signifying that no more drink was to be sold.

A GREAT SUTLERESS

By a strange chance there exists a biography of a sutleress of Marlborough’s time. She was an Irish-woman whose sweetheart on an unlucky day got lamentably drunk, and woke up to find himself in Flanders with the Queen’s shilling in his hand, an enlisted private of infantry. To join him she enlisted in the Scots Greys, fought in several actions and was twice wounded before her sex was discovered. Now it seems to have been a common practice for an old soldier to turn sutler. We find in Shakespeare’s *Henry V* that Ancient (Ensign)

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Pistol forswore soldiering for this more lucrative calling—

*I shall sutler be
Unto the camp, and profits shall accrue.*

So Mrs Christian Ross (for that was her name) became a sutleress with great success, having at length found and married her sweetheart; and she followed him with a bottle of beer all through the battle of Malplaquet until, missing him, she found his body among a heap of dead.

From her account of herself (the writing of which is ascribed to Daniel Defoe) she catered as much for officers as for men and, after a long march, would have a dinner ready prepared for a general and his staff. She was, by her own confession, a shameless thief of pigs, poultry, and such like, which would have brought her to the gallows if she had been caught, for Marlborough was as strict against plundering as Wellington. But probably she was not unique among sutlers in this respect. For the rest she was a regular virago who had a terrific command of language and did her “chucking out” for herself. Mrs Christian Ross, or Kit Ross, as she was generally called, was perhaps the best known character in the Army except Marlborough himself, and, when finally she died, many years later, she was buried with military honours in the churchyard of St Margaret’s, Westminster.

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THE SOLDIER AT HOME

It does not appear that there were any sutlers or canteens in Britain in time of peace, for the sufficient reason that until the very end of the eighteenth century there were no barracks. There were a few fortresses such as the Tower of London, which were used as barracks, but for the most part the Army was billeted in ale-houses, whose landlords were required under the Mutiny Act to provide them at a fixed tariff per man with food, fire and candle. The regiments were so much scattered—the six troops of a regiment of dragoons were often distributed among as many little market towns—that there can have been no opening for a sutler. In Ireland, on the other hand, there were barracks, small and widely dispersed, so that the soldiers might do duty as police; and there it is possible that some old soldier may have been allowed to open a booth for the sale of liquor. Such an indulgence would have lain at the discretion of the commanding officer.

Under the old system, which was not totally abolished until 1871, regiments were the property of their colonels, and troops and companies of their captains, all of whom enjoyed considerable independence. The Army, in fact, was not an army at all, but a collection of regiments. The welfare of the men depended entirely upon the regimental officers, and we shall presently see that all the

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improvements in their condition have been originated by regimental officers.

THE SOLDIER ABROAD

There were foreign garrisons in America and the West Indies in the seventeenth century, but, beyond the fact of their existence, it is difficult to discover much about them. At the Peace of Utrecht in 1714 we acquired further territory in America, besides Gibraltar and Minorca in the Mediterranean, and these new possessions were a terrible puzzle to our administrators in England. They required garrisons, and, therefore, troops must be quartered in them; but it was a revelation to the British Parliament that Gibraltar, Minorca and Nova Scotia contained no ale-houses, and that consequently something exceptional must there be done both for the housing and the feeding of the troops.

A full generation passed away before the new conditions were fairly met; and meanwhile the British soldier had a sorry time. He did not take kindly to foreign service at first, and no wonder, for he had to undergo much hardship without the excitement of active service and, so far as he could see, for no particular reason. On foreign stations he was fed practically as he would have been at sea, on salt provisions, with, however, generally bread in lieu of biscuit, and with some proportion

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of vegetables to avert scurvy. Information upon such points is extremely difficult to find; but, to judge from the records of later times, the men were encouraged, wherever it was possible—as for instance in the Mediterranean garrisons—to cultivate gardens and grow vegetables for themselves.

THE TEMPTATIONS TO DRINK

On the whole the soldier of the first three quarters of the eighteenth century was probably as well off, except in the matter of occupation, as he would have been if he had not enlisted. He was drawn from the class of the agricultural labourer. He was probably not more overcrowded than he would have been in a cottage; his food was of much the same quality and quantity—two meals a day, with occasional fresh meat—and, if he had to pay for both food and clothing by daily stoppage from his pay, he would equally have had to pay for them as a free labourer. In temperate stations also he was often employed in making roads and the like, for which he received extra pay. But in hot climates—India and the West Indies—when once the morning parade was over, the men had little to do but to sit and look at each other.

The result naturally was that they drank to pass the time. In India there was arrack, and in the West Indies there was rum, and new rum, which is poison. Not that the vice of drinking was con-

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fined to the soldier. It pervaded all classes from the highest to the lowest. But in the tropics many causes conspired to drive the soldier to drink. In the first place liquor was cheap; in the second he was fed on monotonous salt food; in the third, he was mewed up in close low stuffy rooms, often unhealthily situated and swarming with mosquitos, which drove him mad; in the fourth, after his solid meal at noon he often felt a craving for supper and could think of no substitute for it but rum; in the fifth, he was rarely able to read, and reading matter was not too plentiful in the West Indies even when the writer knew them forty years ago.

Moreover, notwithstanding the best intentions, their officers could do little for them. They likewise were oppressed by the heat, listless and bored, with every temptation to idle away their time in the planters' houses, where they were welcome and where liquid refreshment could always be found; and it was very difficult for them to provide amusement or occupation for their men. Lastly, it was almost certain that, during the summer months, yellow fever would come and sweep away the best part of the garrison, both officers and men. Even a century ago the average life of a battalion in the West Indies did not last more than two years; and there were many battalions there quartered, for the West Indies were our richest possessions.

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THE SACREDNESS OF THE REGIMENT

These details are given to show how great were the initial difficulties in improving the lot of the soldier; and it must be added that little encouragement was given to him by the country to improve himself. He could be flogged almost to death if he misbehaved, but there were no good-conduct badges, bringing extra pay for exemplary behaviour. Nor was anything done for the soldiers' wives and children who followed them all over the world. Six wives to every company, selected by lot, was the number allowed by regulation to accompany a regiment upon foreign service; and there were agonising scenes when the lots were drawn and numbers of poor women found themselves condemned to part with their husbands, and to support their families at home as best they could. Many contrived to rejoin the regiment wherever it might be, by some mysterious means. The poor creatures were literally lost without it.

It must be remembered that the soldier was enlisted for life, and that his regiment was his home. His attachment to his regiment was deep and touching. In a hurricane at Dominica in 1806 the sentry over the colours of the 2nd D.C.L.I., though repeatedly warned of his danger, stood by them until the barracks were blown down over his head and he was buried in the ruins. Thus even in the West Indies good regimental officers kept